Validating Secularity in Islam: The Sociological Perspective of the Muslim Intellectual Rafiq al-'Azm (1865-1925)

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Abstract: *»Säkularität im Islam: Die soziologische Perspektive des muslimischen Intellektuellen Rafiq al-'Azm (1865-1925)«*. Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's book *al-Islam wa-usul al-hukm* (*Islam and the foundations of power*), published in 1925, is conventionally considered to be the first Islamic argument for secularism in Arabic. Two decades earlier, however, Rafiq al-'Azm had made the same core argument for the separation of religion and politics in the journal *al-Manar*, the mouthpiece of Islamic reformism, which would later come to fiercely attack 'Abd al-Raziq's secularism. This article focuses on selected writings by al-'Azm to illustrate the possibility of validating secularity from within an Islamic discourse. In addition to outlining his argument for the separation of religion and politics, I show that al-'Azm reformulated Islam as a societal order that is conceptually distinct from Islam as a religion, and that he gave primacy to a sociological perspective on religion. Al-'Azm was part of an elitist intelligentsia who discussed the issue of the modern order in the transcultural public sphere of colonial Egypt. In a period of conceptual transformations, individuals from the Islamic discursive tradition, like al-'Azm, used *islam* and related terms to convey both religion and secular society. The use of *islam* to refer to both of these concepts might blur the distinction between religion and the secular but should, in al-'Azm's case, be read as an Islamic validation of secular order and thus as an Islamic contribution to multiple secularities.

Keywords: Islamic reformism, Rafiq al-'Azm, *al-Manar*, Rashid Rida, secularism, secularity, discursive tradition.

1. Introduction: Secularism, Islamic Reformism, and Rafiq al-'Azm

How may one Islamically validate secularity or even secularism? Secularity denotes a basic distinction between religion and a secular realm. At least in its terminological conceptualization, this distinction was first made within Christianity. However, leaving aside the complex hermeneutical operations required

* Florian Zemmin, Institute for Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, Lerchenweg 36, PF 3009 Bern, Switzerland; florian.zemmin@islam.unibe.ch.

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for discerning analogous distinctions in other *pre-modern* traditions, in colonial modernity, the conceptual pair of religion and the secular was inevitably also addressed by individuals from non-Christian "discursive traditions" (Asad 2009), including the Islamic one. The expanding public sphere of Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century was a central arena for negotiating the boundaries between religion and the secular. In that arena, any thinker addressing the modern sociopolitical order was secular in that they recognized inner-worldly social laws, even though they might connect these to an ultimate transcendent cause, and in that they contributed their vision of order to a public debate (for the secular character of the public sphere itself, see Taylor 2007, 185-96; and in regard to Islam: Zaman 2004; Salvatore 2009, esp. 193-4; Schulze 2013, esp. 345). However, secularism, the overt demand to separate religious and sociopolitical order, was predominantly considered an exclusively European-Christian arrangement, alien to Islam and only attainable against the interests of the Islamic religion.

The first Islamic validation of secularism is conventionally attributed to ʻAli ʻAbd al-Raziq (1888-1966) and his book *al-Islam wa-usul al-hukm* (*Islam and the foundations of power*), published in 1925 (translations: ʻAbd al-Raziq 1994; Ali 2009; Ebert and Hefny 2010). Published shortly after the demise of the caliphate and amidst attempts at its reinstitution, *al-Islam wa-usul al-hukm* argues that the prophet Muhammad conveyed a purely religious message; and it was (merely) in order to protect and spread religion that he had to act as a worldly leader. Moreover, since the Islamic sources do not contain any prescriptions concerning the form of government, Muslims in each age are free to choose that form which best suits and ensures their interests. In this age, ʻAbd al-Raziq suggests, this cannot be the caliphate but only a parliamentarian democracy in the manner underpinning the success of European nations. Upon the publication of *al-Islam wa-usul al-hukm*, Cairo's al-Azhar University, the most prestigious Sunni institution of learning, dismissed ʻAbd al-Raziq from his position as judge at a *shariʻa* court.

One vocal public critic of ʻAbd al-Raziq was Rashid Rida (1865-1935), editor of the Cairo-based monthly journal *al-Manar*, which is known as the mouthpiece of Islamic reformism. In the common tripartition of Islamic intellectual trends in modernity, Islamic reformism is situated between traditionalism and secularism, criticizing both the imitation of inflexible and backward traditional practices and the imitation of areligious, culturally alien secular Europe. While this common scheme merits a critical discussion, it provides a useful first ideal-typical orientation in a complex intellectual landscape (Zemmin 2018, 155-60). Rida argued forcefully that religion was a necessity for society. He also increasingly argued for a political dimension of religion. In *al-Manar*, he fiercely attacked ʻAbd al-Raziq, verging on pronouncing him an unbeliever (compare Rida 1925a, 104; 1925b, 231). He also demanded that Azhari scholars refute ʻAbd al-Raziq, who was their colleague at the time (Rida

1925a, 104) and published a letter to that end by a substantial group of Azharis addressed to the head of their institution (Rida and 'Ulama' al-Azhar 1925). Rida himself, it may be recalled, had argued for retaining the caliphate, albeit in a notably modernized version, in his well-known book *al-Khilafa aw al-imama al-'uzma* (*The Caliphate or the Great Imamate*), published in 1922 (translation: Laoust 1986).

There are, however, important commonalities underlying the overtly contradictory positions of Rida and ʿAbd al-Raziq. One may first recall that the greatest modern Muslim reformer, Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), whose thought was most influentially appropriated (and partially distorted) by Rida (Haddad 1997), also had an influence on 'Abd al-Raziq (Souad 2009, 50-61). However, personal intellectual lineage is not really the point here. More important are similar sociocultural positions, common questions, and shared epistemic premises. In fact, while attacking secularist positions, Rida implicitly shared in basic secular premises; something which holds true for Islamic reformism in general. On a fundamental level, this is due to Islamic reformists' engagement with secular modernity, as Malcolm Kerr (1966, 210) has stressed (even though his wording of "assimilation" is outdated):

> Rashīd Riḍā and others of his school found it difficult to accept certain modern practices because they bore a secular label, but it proved equally difficult to put anything else in their place. As such, what passed as an Islamic revival became, in practice, an uneasy process of ideological assimilation.

There were further crucial commonalities between rival positions in the Egyptian transcultural public sphere. Whether Christian, secular, or Islamic in conviction, the urban literati were an elitist intelligentsia who considered themselves to be guiding the people and reforming society, negotiating the foundations of a modern sociopolitical order in public discourse. Against the background of these underlying commonalities, which I will outline further in the following section, it still holds true that for several reasons – colonial power structures, personal convictions, questions of identity and authenticity, limits of public debate, marketing, and discursive arrangements – validating the secular from within an Islamic discourse was a complicated task that often produced contradictory results, especially with regard to the extent to which religion and the secular were explicitly distinguished from each other within that Islamic discourse.

Exploring the possibility of using Islam to refer to both religion and the secular while still distinguishing between both realms, this article highlights and analyzes selected writings by Rafiq al-'Azm (1865-1925), a core contributor to *al-Manar*, whose works have so far received astonishingly little attention. Noteworthy research in European languages prior to Zemmin (2018) consisted only of an analysis of al-'Azm's historiographical approach and a presentation of his political activities, both within more general monographs (Ende 1973; Tauber 1993). If we take the common division into traditionalist, reformist, and

Westernized Muslims, al-'Azm undoubtedly belonged to the trend of Islamic reformism, as al-Batush shows in the only substantial monograph dedicated exclusively to al-'Azm (2007, 77-87, esp. 78). Al-'Azm, however, stands out from this trend in that he clearly distinguishes between religion, society, and the state and argues on the basis of secular, sociological premises. Al-'Azm's works share many of the tropes and arguments of Islamic reformism, underlining the basic secularity of this position. At the same time, his works reflect his remarkable sociological perspective.

This sociological perspective will be discussed in detail in section 5. Section 2 introduces the sociopolitical and cultural setting in which al-'Azm was writing, and which prompted and shaped his intellectual contributions. Sections 3 and 4 deal with the relationship between religion and the state, as well as religion and society respectively. In chapter 6, I bring together my theoretical considerations – which are interwoven throughout this article – in the form of concluding remarks.

2. Islamic Intellectuals in the Public Sphere: Negotiating Modernity in a Discursive Tradition

The writings of Rafiq al-'Azm were part of a "transcultural public sphere" (Salvatore 1997) in which representatives of different discursive traditions negotiated and shaped modern self-understanding under the condition of colonial hegemony. It should be mentioned that the intellectuals in this "public sphere" did not necessarily make political demands of the state, unlike what is constitutive for Habermas's public sphere. Additionally, the phrasing "global public sphere" (Jung 2011) might be misleading in that it overstates the integration and reach of elitist communication networks. As we focus on the Egyptian public sphere, which Rafiq al-'Azm was part of, it is important to remember that this was structured by local sociopolitical and economic conditions but was transnational and transcultural in its intellectual outreach and participation. And while political clubs and secret societies, welfare organizations and benevolent societies, and literary salons and scientific societies were also constitutive for the public sphere of late nineteenth-century Egypt, I focus on the press as an arena of public debate given the textual analysis central to this paper.

Whereas private publishing had been virtually absent in Egypt in 1870, a total of 849 newspapers and journals were founded in Arabic alone between 1876 and 1914; and Egypt clearly replaced Lebanon as the center of private Arabic publishing (Ayalon 2010, 578-9). Many Syro-Lebanese journalists and publishers, including Rafiq al-'Azm and Rashid Rida, migrated to Egypt, where they found more favorable conditions for their ambitions. Three factors are worth mentioning in this regard (Zemmin 2018, 118-22). Firstly, governmental censorship and control over publications broke down in 1879, and the press re-

mained relatively free after the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. British influence in and control over Egypt contributed to the second factor facilitating journalistic ambitions, namely the politicization of a wider populace and their consequent interest in political and societal affairs. From the middle of the nineteenth century, problems of modern order were of central importance in Egypt, as the country formed a central zone of the colonial encounter and was integrated into global economic and political structures. A third factor is that publishers of newspapers and journals in Egypt benefitted from increasing literacy rates, which by 1897 had reached some 20 percent among men in the urban centers of Cairo and Alexandria (El Shakry 2007, 22) and in the country overall amounted to some 15 percent among men and two percent among women in 1917 (Cuno 2010, 104). Somewhat paradoxically, it had been governmental attempts at centralization, bureaucratization, and education that brought forward the new sociocultural group of the *effendiyya* that in public political discourse, as producers and consumers of news, came to challenge the government (Ryzova 2014).

The public arena of the press was shaped and dominated by an urban intelligentsia who considered themselves guides of the people, spokespersons of the nation, and reformers of society. Illiterate people did of course have political interests and agency as well and were in fact able to consume press publications, insofar as these were read aloud in cafés and on the streets. Still, the urban literati claimed to speak for the whole populace and it was only from their vantage point that society was constructed as a coherent object of reform. Tellingly, the intellectuals often used images of peasants (Gasper 2009) or women (Baron 2005) to represent the nation as the object of their domestic civilizing project. And while publishers and journalists did interact a lot with readers who sent in letters and questions from Egypt and far beyond, they had the power over what was being published – governmental restrictions and financial limitations aside. In this sense, the arena of the press was a limited public sphere, in which intellectuals – in addition to covering current affairs, reporting about scientific developments, and disseminating literary works – debated problems of modern sociopolitical order, not least the relationship between religion and progress, civilization, and society.

It is important to keep the rather similar sociocultural background of the urban literati and their shared questions in mind as we now turn to the different, especially Islamic and non-Islamic, answers they put forward in the increasingly varied arena of the press. It was Syro-Lebanese journalists of Christian faith or background that published the first major journals in Egypt, most notably *al-Muqtataf* (founded by Faris Nimr, Ya‘qub Sarruf, and Shahin Makariyus in Beirut in 1876; the journal moved to Cairo in 1884) and *al-Hilal* (founded by Jurji Zaydan in Cairo in 1892). These journals were known for their appropriation of European scientific and political thought, playing major roles in the Arabic reception of Darwin and the dissemination of socialist ideas, among

other things. For yet-to-be-explored reasons, Muslims entered the business of printing later than Christians. The first journal with a title that was explicitly positioned as "Islamic" was *Majallat al-Islam*, founded in 1894. While *al-Manar*, established in 1898, thus did not mark the beginning of Islamic publishing, it quickly became the most important Islamic journal.

Al-Manar's editor Rashid Rida notably enjoyed friendly relationships with the editors of *al-Muqtataf* and, as part of an interconnected, and inherently secular, public discourse, he also referenced non-Islamic publications. In addition, *al-Manar* was concerned with more than religious topics alone. Being an "Islamic journal" did not mean that *al-Manar* represented an Islamic religious discourse separate from secular discourses. Instead, it signified two fundamental things: in the age of print capitalism and a highly competitive market, it was a claim to speak and cater for a certain segment of the public; and it was a promise to address issues of public concern from a specific perspective, namely an Islamic one. As an Islamic journal, *al-Manar* thus appropriated and transformed the Islamic discursive tradition so as to address the issue of modern order.

By articulating the Islamic discursive tradition through the medium of journalism, Islamic reformists developed a modern understanding and expression of the tradition that contrasted with other expressions. The reformists also argued among themselves about which arguments could be expressed in Islamic public discourse. From an academic observer's standpoint, all articulations of the Islamic discursive tradition are legitimate expressions that relate to "Islam's translocal and 'networked' concept of religious Orthodoxy" (Anjum 2007, 666). Related to, but distinct from this Orthodoxy with a capital O are the various "orthodoxies" that, in particular locales, represent the dominant discourse and have the power to define what counts as Islamic. As a discursive tradition, Islam has been continuously reconstructed and enacted in view of contemporary questions and under contingent historical conditions. The Islamic discursive tradition does not exist unalterably in the past. Instead, it is related to both the past and the future through the present (Asad 2009, 20). A major element of Asad's concept of discursive tradition is that it brings into view both creative appropriations of tradition in the present and their limits. The base requirements to be considered legitimately Islamic are preconfigured by Orthodoxy, and they are elaborated and enforced by local orthodoxies, which, as a product of previous contestations within the Islamic discursive tradition, embody the nexus of knowledge and power. These local orthodoxies have special interests in securing their intellectual authority, cultural standing, and economic privileges.

Islamic reformists challenged these interests by moving intellectual Islamic discourse from the orthodox *madrasa*s into the medium of journalism, by reconstructing Islam as a modern religion and by earning their living in this manner. While discursive traditions are continuously negotiated, this publicization

of Islam incited a major struggle over orthodoxy. Characteristically, Islamic public intellectuals criticized established authorities of religion as *muqallidun*: blind followers of tradition. However, they also paid heed to orthodoxy not only because of its power but also because many reformists had received a classical Islamic education themselves and, moreover, aimed to win over as many adherents of the discursive tradition as possible, that is, in a sense, to establish a new orthodoxy. The prominence of *al-Manar* attests to the reformists' considerable success in this regard, as does the fact that al-Azhar, the most authoritative institution of Sunni learning, also founded its own journal in 1930 (Corrado 2011). What is more, in the transcultural public sphere of print journalism, Islamic intellectuals not only interacted with local orthodoxy, but also with other understandings of Islam, including those professed by non-Muslim colonialists. To position oneself as an Islamic intellectual in the public sphere of Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century thus meant that as a representative of the Islamic discursive tradition, one participated in the transnational and transcultural negotiation over the contents, meanings, and modes of reasoning of that discursive tradition under the conditions of modernity.

In this negotiation, Rafiq al-'Azm pushed to elaborate a modern understanding of the Islamic discursive tradition based on historiographical and sociological premises; and he thereby not only challenged orthodoxy, but also tested the limits of Islamic reformism itself. Al-'Azm was born into a notable family in Damascus, whose members governed Ottoman Syrian provinces in the eighteenth century and filled administrative positions until after Syrian independence in 1918 (Zemmin 2018, 307-8). He was educated both in semi-official Islamic study circles and in a Roman Catholic school, but apparently only gained minimal knowledge of French. In 1894, al-'Azm migrated to Egypt where he, like so many other Syro-Lebanese intellectuals, including Rashid Rida, found more favorable conditions for pursuing his journalistic ambitions and political activities. Al-'Azm joined the circle of Muhammad 'Abduh and became a close collaborator and friend of Rashid Rida. He contributed regularly to *al-Manar* and both men also worked together in political societies. Most noteworthy here is the Society of the Ottoman Council (Jam'iyyat al-Shura al-'Uthmaniyya) that was founded in 1907, comprising both Muslim and Christian members, with al-'Azm as treasurer and Rida as president (Tauber 1993, 51-3). Al-'Azm experimented with different political affiliations throughout the course of his life, shifting from Pan-Islamism and Ottomanism to ethnic nationalism (al-Batush 2007, 90-104). Arguably, he would have taken up a position in the Syrian government had it not been for his deteriorating health (ibid., 30-1). Shortly after al-'Azm's death, *al-Manar*'s press released his collective works. In his eulogy to al-'Azm, which was published in that collection and in *al-Manar* (Rida 1925c, 288), Rashid Rida characterized his friend as a historiographical scholar (*al-'alim al-mu'arrikh*) and sociological writer (*al-katib al-ijtima'i*), who was, however, *mistaken* by some readers for a religious scholar

(*min 'ulama' al-din*), since his attitude (*naz'a*) was Islamic (ibid., 289). In addition to writing for *al-Manar*, Rafiq al-'Azm also contributed to *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Hilal*, and published in a range of newspapers, including the most widely circulated paper *al-Ahram* and the pro-English paper *al-Muqattam* (al-Batush 2007, 26), although we know little about his articles in these publications. What is certain is that when writing for the Islamic journal *al-Manar*, al-'Azm formulated his arguments from within the Islamic discursive tradition, and they were critically assessed as such by other stakeholders in that tradition.

In this sense, the debate outlined below between the Syrian emigrant al-'Azm and the Indian author al-Yafi'i in the Cairo-based journal *al-Manar* illustrates the transnational negotiation within Islamic reformism over the contents and meanings of the Islamic discursive tradition and can be read as testing which arguments were acceptable in and to an Islamic public.

3. Does Islam Demand the Separation or Fusion of Religion and Politics? Al-'Azm's Argument and How It Was Critiqued

3.1 Al-'Azm's Argument for the Separation of Religion and Politics

While in 1925 Rida attacked 'Abd al-Raziq's argument that Islam did not contain a form of government as "a new innovation, the likes of which was not pronounced by anyone belonging to Islam, truly or even falsely; a satanic innovation (*bid'a shaytaniyya*)" (Rida 1925a, 100-1), twenty years earlier, his friend Rafiq al-'Azm had called for the separation of religion and politics in Rida's very own journal. It is not my intention here to make a full-fledged comparison of al-'Azm and 'Abd al-Raziq. Instead, my reference to 'Abd al-Raziq, who is conventionally regarded to be the first Islamic thinker to have made this argument, is meant to underline the relevance of al-'Azm in this regard. It is sufficient to say that both men shared in the core argument for separating religion and politics on the basis that the prophet Muhammad had brought a religious message only.

In an article in *al-Manar*, al-'Azm (1904a) addresses the then-prevalent question of why Muslims were trailing behind the powerful European nations that epitomized civilization. In the article, al-'Azm argues that the root cause of Muslim weakness is the mixing (*mazj*) of politics with religion. After establishing Muslims' supposed backwardness compared to European nations and "pagan" Japan in the first part of the article, al-'Azm primarily focuses his arguments on the Ottoman Empire, which he considers to be the most advanced Islamic polity still. Al-'Azm argues that the Ottoman Empire was unable to

fully advance to the heights of the civilized nations, because its government was Islamic. He argues that the Ottoman Empire did have good

> military schools that would have created a highly advanced ordered military for the state (*dawla*) if [the empire] had not been afflicted by the weakness of politics (*siyasa*) and financial resources (*mal*), and indeed by the weakness of the basis (*asas*) of the government, because it is an Islamic government (*hukuma islamiyya*). (ibid., 306)

Al-'Azm attributes the fatal mixing of religion with politics to the simplicity of the Bedouin Arabs who had first received Islam. These Bedouins "did not possess anything of [the knowledge of] the laws of social association (*qawanin al-ijtima'*), the order of the advanced governments (*nizam al-hukumat al-raqiyya*), and of the civilized peoples (*al-shu'ub al-mutamaddina*)" (ibid., 308). They thus mixed religion (*din*) with every matter of worldly life (*al-hayat al-dunyawiyya*), especially the political life of societies (*hayat al-umam al-siyasiyya*). If the Bedouin Arabs had oriented themselves toward the most advanced nation of their times, namely the Romans, they could have implemented an orderly form of government, distinct from religion. But since they failed to do so, the first controversies over succession of the prophet were already couched in religious terms, a practice that was exacerbated by Persian influence and continues to afflict Muslims today (ibid., 309-10). Al-'Azm maintains that piety ought to be a matter of conscience (*amr wijdani*) alone, as is recognized by modern democratic governments (*al-hukumat al-dimuqratiyya*) (ibid., 310-1), and he urges his fellow Muslims to work towards this type of government as it best suits their interests (ibid., 312).

Al-'Azm justifies this secularist distinction between religion and politics by updating the conceptual pair of *din wa-dunya* (religion and the world), stressing that the prophet, in contrast to the Bedouin Arabs whose practice lingered on and became institutionalized, did distinguish clearly between both spheres (ibid., 309). Through this, al-'Azm also safeguards what he deems to be the true Islamic religion, which must and cannot be an obstacle to progress (ibid., 307-8, 312).

3.2 Different Strategies for Validating Modern Politics

Al-'Azm's article prompted a response by an Indian Muslim named Salih Ibn 'Ali al-Yafi'i, who thanked al-'Azm for his efforts to redeem Muslim weakness but maintained that this redemption would not occur by putting religion on one side and politics on another. Instead, al-Yafi'i said, it would be achieved by paying heed to religion in political life again (al-Yafi'i 1904, 541-2). According to al-Yafi'i, the Islamic religion decidedly does contain political principles, not least the principle of consultation (*shura*) and independent rational investigation (*ijtihad*) in the field of legislation (ibid., 584). Al-Yafi'i argues that Muhammad and his first successors practiced a form of government that re-

sembled modern Western forms of government (ibid., 581-3). In fact, the latter built their democracies on Islamic principles, al-Yafi'i asserts (ibid., 549-50). While, unlike al-'Azm, al-Yafi'i does not use the explicit term *dimuqratiyya*, he reiterates the well-known argument of Islamic reformists that European or Western progress and civilization is in fact derived from Islam. Arguing that the principles of Islamic religion are superior with regard to political order, al-Yafi'i refutes al-'Azm's argument that Muslim misery could have been avoided had the early Arabs followed the Roman form of government (ibid., 548).

In response to this critique, Rafiq al-'Azm (1904b) reiterated and strengthened his secularist argument while also somewhat reconciling it with al-Yafi'i's perspective in his article *Da'f al-muslimin bi-mazj al-siyasa bi-l-din* (*The weakness of Muslims results from the mixing of politics with religion*). The article's title may have been taken from Rashid Rida's summary of al-Yafi'i's critique (Rida in al-Yafi'i 1904, 540). In any case, it pinpoints al-'Azm's argument well. He stresses that his comment regarding "politics being different from religion (*al-siyasa ghayr al-din*)" must not be misunderstood as him calling on "Muslims to abandon (*turk*) their religion" (al-'Azm 1904b, 661). Since politics to al-'Azm is a completely secular matter, he maintains that by discussing the basic order or constitution (*al-nizam al-asasi*) of the state, he did not even touch upon religion (ibid., 662-3). According to al-'Azm, the early history of Islam, as depicted in his main historiographical work (al-'Azm 1907), shows that Muhammad primarily conveyed a religious message, whereas the caliphs primarily were leaders of the state. As such, he argues "the state is different from religion (*al-dawla ghayr al-din*)" (al-'Azm 1904b, 667).

Alongside this historical argument, al-'Azm now resorts to a very common distinction made by Islamic reformists, namely that between *'ibadat* and *mu'amalat*, which he primarily views as a distinction between religious and worldly matters. He argues that the former are comprehensively covered by clear and universally applicable prescriptions in the Islamic sources, the Qur'an and *sunna*. For most worldly matters, however, humans have to arrive at arrangements and regulations through their own efforts (*ijtihad*), since the Islamic sources formulate merely basic principles that ought to be continuously elaborated for contingent contexts. Reformists disagree as to which aspects are actually covered in the Islamic sources, either in the form of clear prescriptions or of basic principles. To al-'Azm, the Islamic sources are silent on the matter of politics (ibid., 664-5), and so Muslims are free and obliged to choose their form of government, which, al-'Azm argues, ought to be a democratic, parliamentarian one.

Al-Yafi'i again responded to al-'Azm (al-Yafi'i, 1905), advocating the same basic type of government but validating it by rooting it in Islamic sources, which, according to him and in contrast to al-'Azm, are not silent on the matter at all. Upholding a religious basis of modern order, al-Yafi'i also maintains that Japan's success is dependent on (pseudo-)religion (ibid., 910). Al-'Azm, who

due to his secular understanding of politics had had no difficulty in commending the political order of the ancient Romans as exemplary for their times, had cited the example of "pagan" Japan as an argument against al-Yafi'i's claim that worldly order could only be successful if tinged by religion (al-'Azm 1904b, 663). The historical and empirical examples al-'Azm cites reflect his stance on the separation of, or connection between, religion and politics. Al-'Azm and al-Yafi'i advocate the same basic form of government for contemporary Muslims but employ different strategies to that end. Before I examine these different strategies, Rashid Rida's comment on the debate provides an insightful summary of both positions.

Rida characterizes the debate between al-'Azm and al-Yafi'i as a debate between a modern viewpoint, which distinguishes between religion and politics, and a classical Islamic viewpoint, which does not recognize this distinction:

> His [i.e., al-'Azm's] argument of putting religion on one side [and politics on another] thus rests on the difference (*farq*) between the purely religious section (*al-qism al-dini al-mahd*) and the purely worldly section (*al-qism al-dunyawi al-mahd*) of the *shari'a*; and that is a modern usage (*istilah 'asri*). Al-Yafi'i's argument [in turn] rests on the [premise of] inseparability (*'idm al-tafriqa*); and that is the old Islamic usage (*al-istilah al-islami al-qadim*). (Rida in al-Yafi'i 1905, 912)

3.3 Contested Conceptualizations of Religion and the Secular in the Islamic Tradition

The above debate is clearly informed by and addresses the basic distinction between religion and the secular, which in this instance is the political sphere or the state. The use of the contemporary Arabic term for the "secular," *'almani*, remained marginal throughout *al-Manar* and the normative concept of "non-religious" (*ladini*) only came into usage in the journal in the 1920s (Zemmin 2018, 502). However, in general, concepts are operative before they are crystallized in specific terms. In Arabic, the final decades of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century were marked by great terminological variability. In this formative period of modern sociopolitical concepts, the public negotiation of boundaries between the spheres of the modern order by intellectuals contributed to the ongoing negotiation of the terms used to conceptualize these spheres. Rafiq al-'Azm clearly has a modern perspective on communal order when he says that "religion is not the state" (*al-din ghayr al-dawla*). To explain this modern conceptual pair to his readership, he notably refers back to the distinction between *din wa-dunya* (religion and the world). In response to al-Yafi'i's suggestion that al-'Azm wanted to abandon religion, al-'Azm also cites the conceptual pair of *'ibadat* and *mu'amalat* as a means of expressing the distinction between religion and the secular from within the Islamic discursive tradition. Islam thus both validates the modern distinction

between religion and the secular and, at the same time, connects the religious to the secular.

This distinction-yet-connection is inevitable if we consider religion and the secular to be twins that sustain each other and are unable to stand on their own. This is the classical modern vision of order as it informed debates in Egypt, India, England, and France alike. Tellingly, it is after the heyday of modernity, that we find claims to either the secular or the religious being all that there is (Davis 1994, 1-2). The terminological pair of "religion" and "the secular," which forms the hegemonic conceptualization of religion and the secular, was first distinguished within Christianity, that is, it was also held together and connected by Christianity. Analogously, the terminological pair of *din wa-dunya* or *'ibadat wa-mu'amalat* served to distinguish and at the same time hold together religion and the secular within Islam.

Based on this foundational arrangement, Rafiq al-'Azm considers religion and the secular to be mutually autonomous, whereas Salih Ibn 'Ali al-Yafi'i prioritizes religion over the secular. Al-'Azm's understanding, which Rida regards as a "modern usage," rather neatly shares in a secular modern understanding. However, al-Yafi'i's argument for the inseparability of religion and the secular in Islam does not mirror "the old Islamic convention," as Rida suggested, but rather appropriates and reinterprets classical conceptual pairs to refer to the recent distinction between religion and the secular. The fact that this distinction is somewhat blurred by being dressed in Islamic terms should not distract us from its being operative in the first place. Since Islam is the connector between religion and the secular and may be used to address both spheres, the main question of debate really is how closely both spheres are connected.

While al-'Azm in his above response to al-Yafi'i somewhat countered the reproach about him arguing for secular politics over religion, and clarified the mutual autonomy of religion and the secular in Islam by introducing the conceptual pair of *'ibadat* and *mu'amalat*, he depicted a closer connection between both spheres in one later text. Before coming to this text, I should state that I am not aware of any publications by al-'Azm after his treatise from 1912 analyzed below. This discontinuation of al-'Azm's publication activities makes it difficult, if not impossible, to trace developments in his thinking and argumentation. No article by al-'Azm appeared in *al-Manar* for 15 years. Shortly after his death, Rida published a text by al-'Azm on *al-Hukuma al-islamiyya* (*The Islamic government*; al-'Azm 1926) – with the very purpose of further refuting 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's secularist argument. In this previously unpublished text, originally intended as an introduction to a book on *Ta'rikh al-Siyasa al-Islamiyya* (*The History of Islamic Politics*), al-'Azm names the alleged constituents of an Islamic government as they had either been implemented during the time of the prophet or had been laid down in his *shari'a*. The imamate in succession to the prophet here is defined as the leadership in religion and the world

(*al-imama ri'asa 'amma fi al-din wa-l-dunya*; ibid., 513). In the text, al-'Azm validates a democratic system of government by maintaining that it resembles the type of government in early Islamic times (ibid., 516).

If we – on the thin basis of this one text that was published posthumously – suppose that al-'Azm did make a strategic shift in legitimizing a democratic government, this might be explained by political developments and changes in public requirements. In the first decades of the twentieth century, significant segments of the Arabic public became disappointed with colonial politics and liberal experiments. Al-'Azm retained a more favorable view of the presence of European powers in the East than Rashid Rida (Tauber 1993, 268-9). Still, as is well known, several secular and liberal Muslim intellectuals had increasingly resorted to Islam for their arguments since the 1920s. This was also due to considerations of how best to convince the masses. In 1900, al-'Azm had already said that, in order to remedy the misery of Muslim society, he had chosen the way or method of religion (*tariq al-din*), since this society, unlike others, is based on religion, on which were also erected the pillars of the great states in Islam (al-'Azm 1899/1900, 5). This basic statement on the interdependence of religion and the state may well inform al-'Azm's argument for the separation of religion and the state, as expressed in al-'Azm's article from 1904. Epistemologically, al-'Azm was hardly less secular in the 1920s than in 1904 though he refrained somewhat from his early secularist argument for political reasons.

Crucially, the shift from validating politics as autonomous from religion to considering it part of religion is facilitated by Islam serving as a link between the distinct spheres of religion and the secular. Since both religion and the secular in modernity are addressed by and as Islam, this allows Muslim intellectuals to rather easily shift between a religious and a secular perspective, while remaining within the Islamic discursive tradition. Thus, for example, the Qur'anic principle of *shura* may either be taken to command autonomous rational investigation in matters of politics, or it may be used as a starting point for formulating an allegedly timeless Islamic theory of political order. Indeed, whereas al-'Azm spoke explicitly of "democratic governments," elucidating and legitimizing this concept associated with European states by referring to *shura*, al-Yafi'i, in line with his stressing the Islamic roots of this type of government, ignores the term "democratic" and speaks only of *shura* or a "republican representative authority" (*sulta jumhuriyya niyabiyya*; al-Yafi'i 1905, 903-7). This possibility of shifting perspectives and loosening or tightening connections between religion and the secular is still discernible in the writings of Muslim reformers today (Zemmin 2015).

The constant possibility of shifting from a religious to a secular perspective and back, while remaining within an Islamic discourse, also suggests that one must not categorize these intellectuals as either religious or secular, theological or sociological. While I do not intend to over-systematize al-'Azm's thought or to label him too narrowly as either religious or secular, in section 5, I will pro-

pose that al-'Azm argued primarily from a sociological perspective that religion was necessary for society. First, however, I shall argue that al-'Azm was almost exclusively occupied not with the religious dimension of Islam, but rather with its societal one, and that he, in fact, formulated Islam as a (principle of) society.

4. Islam as a Social Order: *Tanbih al-afham*

In modernity, the secular other of religion, the world, was further distinguished into society and the state, as mentioned above. Rafiq al-'Azm clearly shared this distinction, juxtaposing for example (al-'Azm 1899, 84-5) the order of society (*nizam al-umma/al-mujtama'*) with the order of the state (*nizam al-dawla*). This enabled him to address the relationship between religion and society separately from the relationship between religion and the state. Also, 'Abd al-Raziq denied a political dimension to Islam, but not a social or economic one. And Rashid Rida along with other Islamic reformists considered religion to have been primarily for society, not the state, at least until the First World War (Haddad 2008). While again sharing many premises, tropes, and arguments with other Islamic reformists, Rafiq al-'Azm explicates the secular dimension of modern Islam and differs from other Islamic reformists in that he considers Islam not as simply being for society but rather *as being* society.

Most pertinent in this regard is al-'Azm's work *Tanbih al-afham ila matalib al-hayat al-ijtima'iyya wa-l-islam* (*Alerting the intellects to the demands of social life and Islam*) (al-'Azm 1900), one of the first Arabic works to explicitly address the social question (al-Batush 2007, 35, 212). This book is the only work by al-'Azm translated into another language, namely Ottoman Turkish (al-'Azm 1906). It originated from five articles al-'Azm wrote for the short-lived Cairene journal *al-Mawsu'at*. To these articles, which "elucidated some characteristics of this religion that were the reason for the advancement of Muslims" (al-'Azm 1900, 2), he added another four chapters investigating the reasons for the alleged subsequent decline of Islamic society. According to him, a central cause of this decline was indeed the neglect of Islamic teachings, which ought to be revived. Al-'Azm shares with Islamic reformists the equation of the core principles of religion with justice, moderation, reason, and human interest. He, however, makes a clear distinction between an otherworldly and a worldly, a spiritual and a societal dimension of Islam (ibid., 56, 66-67). It is evident that he wants to leave the religious dimension to the *'ulama'*, while he himself is interested in the societal dimension of Islam. Considering faith in God as constitutive for Islamic society (*umma*), al-'Azm thus delegates the reform of the religious dimension of Islam to the *'ulama'*, while he himself, the sociological writer (*al-katib al-ijtima'i*) that he is, selectively appropriates the Qur'an as a text about society and constructs Islam as a social order.

Rafiq al-‘Azm formulates his Islamic response to the problem of social order in direct engagement with European responses. The social question concerned primarily the proper societal distribution of work and economic resources; and according to al-‘Azm, who shares in an evolutionist understanding of society, it manifested itself most forcefully in European societies due to them being the most advanced and thus most resourceful and complex societies (ibid., 3). The suffering of the poor and the workers leads to a disruption of the order of society (*nizam al-ijtima‘*) as a whole, al-‘Azm asserts. This problem, referred to by scholars of civilization (*‘ulama’ al-‘umran*) and philosophers as the social question (*al-mas’ala al-ijtima‘iyya*), is formulated by al-‘Azm as the demands of societal life (*matalib al-hayat al-ijtima‘iyya*; ibid., 7).

Al-‘Azm’s frequently repeated central argument is that while European societies fail to arrive at a proper order, because their different schools of thoughts only attend to a particular demand of societal life and ignore others, Islam formulated a societal order combining the contemporary particularistic European responses perfectly 1300 years ago (ibid., esp. 6-7, 23-4, 36-8, 56). The European schools al-‘Azm has in mind are socialists (*ishtirakiyun*), liberals, who advocate the principle of personal independence (*mabda’ al-istiqlal al-dhati*), anarchists (*fawdiyun*), nihilists (*‘adamiyun*), and religionists (*diniyun*; ibid., 4-5). Al-‘Azm does not discuss anarchists and nihilists any further at all and primarily focuses on liberalists and socialists, constructing Islam as a middle-way between the two.

Al-‘Azm argues that Islam, which he explicitly considers here as a principle of social association (*min haythu kawnuhu ijtima‘an*), combines the values of individual liberty, independence, and personal ambitions (ibid., 15) with the natural human need for social cooperation (ibid., 19):

> There is no need for us to elaborate in this article on the established fact that man is a civil being by nature (*madani bi-l-tab‘*), which means, he is in need of cooperation (*ta‘awun*) and social association (*ijtima‘*); for this is proven by the naturalness of social association itself. And [there is no need for us] to refute the doctrine (*madhhab*) of excessive personal liberty (*al-hurriyya al-shakhsiyya*) of those Europeans who insist upon independence of the subject (*al-istiqlal al-dhati*) in the sense of considering man a socio-political entity unto himself (*al-insan umma fi nafsihi*), not belonging to a [larger] social collectivity (*la umma la-hu*) all [members] of which rely upon each other for the acquisition of the benefits of social life and the repulsion of the harms of animal-like solitude; for this is refuted by his nature. Rather, we want to elucidate the meaning of human society in Islam, as concerns its being a [principle of] social association (*min haythu kawnuhu ijtima‘an*) according to which man is an independent entity unto himself (*umma mustaqilla fi nafsihi*), when one looks at his specificity, whereas in a broader view the members of one community (*abna’ al-milla al-wahida*) are a society jointly guaranteeing (*umma mutakafila*) its interests (*masalihaha*).

In al-‘Azm’s construction, true Islam functioned in the beginning as a superior principle of society, lifting human social association to another level in that it

replaced tribal communities with a single society, whose individual members enjoyed a certain independence but were at the same time firmly connected to each other. While the connection and cooperation of the members of society hinge on their common belief in God, this belief is not at all addressed as a means to otherworldly felicity but exclusively in its function for societal order and unity (ibid., 20-2).

After having formulated Islam as a principle of social order, perfectly balancing the principles of individual liberalism and collective socialism as manifest in modern Europe, it is in engaging the European religionists (*diniyun*) that al-'Azm eventually does address the spiritual dimension of Islam – notably in marked distinction from its societal dimension: In contrast to European religionists, al-'Azm argues that spiritual education (*al-tarbiya al-ruhiyya*) does not in itself ensure civilization and societal order. Instead, spiritual education is needed as "a shield (*siyaj*) for the other demands of human society (*ijtima'*) that Islam has established" (ibid., 27). Intended to protect Islam as a societal order, the spiritual teachings of Islam basically amount to a rational, ethical call to active, moderate, reasonable, and just social behavior (ibid., 27-31). Al-'Azm thus formulates Islam as a social order and outlines the basic requirements for religion as a necessary complement to society, leaving, however, the detailed elaboration of religious teachings and doctrines to the scholars of religion.

Testifying again to the unproblematic shift of perspectives in an Islamic discourse, al-'Azm thus primarily validates the Islamic religion from within the secular but at the same time validates the secular from within Islamic religion, and demands that religious scholars elaborate religious teachings in that vein. If the integration of a secular and a religious perspective is constitutive of Islamic reformists, al-'Azm is, in my view, the proponent of this intellectual trend who most clearly argues from a secular perspective. While it would be misleading to straightforwardly label al-'Azm as a Durkheimian sociologist of religion, classifying him as a scholar of religion would be even more misleading. With this in mind, the following section highlights al-'Azm's sociological perspective on religion.

5. Al-'Azm's Sociological Perspective on Religion: *Kayfiyyat intishar al-adyan*

5.1 Summary of al-'Azm's Treatise on the Spread of Religions

In 1912, al-'Azm published his *Risala fi bayan kayfiyyat intishar al-adyan* (*Treatise elucidating the manner of the spread of religions*; al-'Azm 2015). This treatise was prompted by a question posed in the above-mentioned journal *al-Hilal*. An anonymous author had asked whether Islamic civilization (*al-*

tamaddun al-islami) was established with the pen or with the sword. Al-'Azm, who had a passion for studying the history of the order of human society (*tarikh nizam al-ijtima' al-bashari*), submitted an answer to this question. He first clarified that Islamic civilization was not established at the beginning of Islam, but only after the establishment of Islamic *shari'a* and Muslim rule (ibid., 7). This led him to address the relationship between civilization and religions in general, and between civilization and Islamic *shari'a* in particular. He then proved that Islamic *shari'a* was established by propagation (*da'wa*) and that the Islamic civilization evolving from it was established with the pen, not the sword. This argument was refuted by the anonymous author in *al-Hilal* (who signed off with Ra'. Nun.), who argued that both Islamic *shari'a* and Islamic civilization were established with the sword. Al-'Azm persisted in debating with his opponent in *al-Hilal*, who however discontinued the debate after a while. In order to establish his argument in somewhat greater detail, al-'Azm, who points to the intellectual arena in which his writing is situated by adducing the rules of public debate (ibid., 8, 41), thus composed the treatise in question (ibid., 8).

This treatise consists of five sections, the order of which reflects al-'Azm's sociological perspective. Section one establishes the premise of human need for social association and then maintains that the pillar (*di'ama*) of society is religion (ibid., 11-2). Section two asserts that the progress (*taraqqi*) of the *shari'a*s is tied to the progress of humans, with Islamic *shari'a* being the final and comprehensive guarantor of societal order (ibid., 13-6). Section three, entitled "strength hinges on orders (*al-quwa fi al-shara'i'*)," then further substantiates the argument that it is humans' natural tendency to greed and rivalry that necessitates the need for social collectivities to be sustained by a *shari'a* (ibid., 17). Before dealing with the first two sections in greater detail, let me quickly summarize the remaining two sections, which take up greater portions of the treatise but are less foundational.

Shifting somewhat from a theoretical argument to an apologetic defense, al-'Azm explains in section four why *jihad* is inevitable, not as a central part of the *shari'a*, but rather to defend the *shari'a*, which mirrors public interests and ensures social order, from those opposing it (ibid., 19-20). To this end, all godly prophets sanctioned *jihad*, al-'Azm points out. Comparing the legitimacy of *jihad* as recognized by Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad, he finds Muhammad's version to be the mildest one (ibid., 21-4). Thus, and here al-'Azm makes the apologetic nature of this section obvious, the legitimacy of *jihad* must not be an obstacle to acknowledging the truth of the Muhammadan *shari'a* (ibid., 24).

In section five, al-'Azm refutes the three arguments his opponent in *al-Hilal* had presented to support the claim that Islam was spread by the sword. While we should not concern ourselves with the historical details of the debate here, al-'Azm's historiographical depiction of the spread of Islam, as well as Christi-

anity and Judaism, is interesting in that he focuses on the historical contingencies and sociopolitical circumstances shaping religions. While assuming a divine origin of these religions, al-'Azm explains their institutions through the workings of history and human society (ibid., 32-41).

The central argument of al-'Azm's treatise, which also terminologically elucidates the use of *islam* to refer to both religion and the secular, is that the Islamic conquest (*al-fath al-islami*) was not at all a religious one (*fath dini*), as his opponent claims (ibid., 26, 30). Instead, it was "a political conquest (*fath siyasi*), with no connection between it and the call to religion" (ibid., 31). As in his debate with al-Yafi'i and like 'Abd al-Raziq in 1925, al-'Azm thus categorically separates religion and politics. However, he deems both to be "Islamic" and sees no contradiction in adding to his foregoing statement that "Islamic *shari'a* combined (*jama'at*) politics and religion" (ibid., 31). The Islamic conquest was based on the political section (*al-qism al-siyasi*) of the worldly part of the *shari'a* dealing with *mu'amalat* and did not touch the religious part (*al-qism al-dini*), on which Islam (in the sense of its being a religion) is based (ibid., 31-32). In this light, al-'Azm's assertion that politics and religion in the Muhammadan *shari'a* are more closely connected than in others (ibid., 16) is an argument supporting the mutual dependency and autonomy of religion and politics, rather than their fusion.

5.2 Al-'Azm's Sociological Perspective on Religion

Al-'Azm's basic sociological take on religion becomes clearer as we now turn from his depiction of the make-up and spread of the Islamic or Muhammadan *shari'a* in comparison with other godly *shari'a*s to the societal necessity of religion in the first place, as laid out in the first two sections of the treatise. The fact that al-'Azm also ascribes a divine truth to religion does not undo his argument for the autonomy of immanent societal laws and the workings of history, but should rather be read as a transcendent complementary sustaining the immanent sphere.

Al-'Azm's starting point is the human need for social association. Already for the simplest tasks, humans have to cooperate with others. Beyond this basic necessity, their intellect makes them aspire to society through which refined life is established. To this end, groups (*jama'at*) and tribes (*aqwam*) were formed, which already in their most simple state followed the regulation of social order (*khadi'atan li-hukm al-nizam al-ijtima'i*), even if only by what is called group solidarity (*'asabiyya* [ibid., 11]). *'Asabiyya* was a central concept in Ibn Khaldun's famous philosophy of collective life (Ibn Khaldun 2005a; translation: Ibn Khaldun 2005b), which al-'Azm selectively appropriated to refer to modern society.

Since society in this basic form was unable to satisfy the desire for overall concord (*ta'aluf 'umumi*) and civilized social association (*ijtima' madani*), al-

‘Azm argues that separate peoples (*shu‘ub*) were established over time and the circle of worldly social interactions (*da’irat al-mu‘amalat al-dunyawiyya*) widened to form bonds (*rawabit*) more universal than that of group solidarity. Different tribes and rivaling forces were integrated into this more comprehensive collectivity, seeking cooperation, which is the reason for the growth and survival of collectivities. The increasingly complex make-up of society consisting of different groups necessitated the existence of a deterring power (*al-quwa al-wazi‘a*) protecting the rights of individuals (*huquq al-afrad*) with regard to their collective and personal actions and those of groups (*jama‘at*) concerning their national rights and external relations (al-‘Azm 2015, 11).

For al-‘Azm, this force is godly religion, as the following longer quote shows. Note how it is the natural aspiration to society that brings forth the need for religious regulations and how these, at the end of the quote, are validated as necessary precisely to the extent required by social association:

> [P]ersonal disputes and national quarrels harm culture (*‘umran*) and are an obstacle to the ways of progress (*taraqqi*) in societal life. This necessitated the existence of a spiritual force (*quwa ma‘nawiyya*) winning over the factions of the peoples (*shu‘ub*) to a comprehensive point (*nuqta jami‘a*) by which ethnic group solidarity (*al-‘asabiyya al-jinsiyya*) is transformed into a general bond, from which derives the unification of forces, the solidification of the bonds of social formation and association (*tawthiq ‘ura al-ta’lif wa-l-ijtima‘*), and the stabilization of the pillars of the civil order (*tawattud da‘a’im al-nizam al-madani*) that guarantees the continuation of human progress on the path of wisdom and knowledge.
>
> And it is obviously known that these bonds (*rawabit*) required by human collectivities and this spiritual power in which the soul finds rest, that these are the godly orders (*al-shara’i‘ al-ilahiyya*), which unite the peoples around the authority of affection and love, strengthen among them the bonds (*‘ura*) of brotherhood and equality, and guide them towards obedience (*ta‘a*), which is the basis of religions (*al-shara’i‘*) that demand the ordering of conditions and the mutual collaboration in works. Religious orders (*al-shara’i‘*) are thus necessary (*daruriyya*) for humans to the extent that they are in need of society (*bi-miqdar hajatihim ila al-ijtima‘*). (ibid., 11-2)

Al-‘Azm basically argues that society creates religion which it requires to sustain itself; an argument that in its basic form is well familiar from Émile Durkheim’s sociology of religion (1912; translation: Durkheim 1915). Al-‘Azm, due to his personal belief, locates the origin of religion not only in society but also in God, thus grounding society in transcendence. To use Charles Taylor’s metaphor (2007, esp. 542-57), in al-‘Azm’s open spin on “the immanent frame,” secular society is stabilized by transcendent religion. This ultimately consolidates, rather than alters, the make-up and workings of immanent secular society, especially since religion for al-‘Azm is in fact nothing other than the interest and support of society, as the continuation of the foregoing quote makes clear:

After having shown that "religions are necessary for humans to the extent that they are in need of society," al-'Azm (2015, 12) continues:

> It furthermore is established that the obedience of human groups made up of different ethnicities and races (*al-'anasir wa-l-ajnas*) to an attentive authority (*sulta wa'iyya*) and a comprehensive order (*nizam shamil*) is a matter difficult to attain as long as this [order] is not the most appropriate for [humans'] overall societal good. And since humans realize only in the long run and gradually that the godly orders are that aspect (*al-wajh*) that guarantees the comfort of overall society (*al-kafil bi-rahat al-ijtima' al-'umumi*) and that [humans'] obedience to His, may He be exalted, orders and their submission to [the orders'] unifying authority is a matter indispensable with regard to the interest of societies (*maslahat al-mujtama'at*), which is established through cooperation and unity, on which depend the growth of cultured life (*numuw al-hayat al-adabiyya*) and the survival of the species (*biqa' al-naw'*); therefore [i.e. because of humans realizing this gradually] their clinging to the principle of mutual social affection (*al-ta'aluf al-ijtima'i*) under the union of religions (*taht jami'at al-adyan*) has been a continuous matter that people have been unable to dispense with in any age.
>
> It is certain that the support of society is religion (*di'amat al-ijtima' huwa al-din*), for by it the order of societies (*nizam al-umam*) is protected from defects and sedition and the danger of anarchy and [particularizing] ethnical group solidarities, which drop the peoples (*al-shu'ub*) through total destruction to a bottomless place, is warded off.

Having thus established the natural need of humans as rational and social beings for religion as a guarantor and protector of society, al-'Azm in the second section depicts the advancement of religion as a requirement of human advancement, which follows the immanent workings of history and society (ibid., 13). This evolutionist argument was prominently formulated in 'Abduh's famous *Risalat al-tawhid* (1897, many re-editions; translations: Abdou 1965, 'Abduh 1966), with which al-'Azm surely was familiar. Indeed, when moving from his sociological argument for the necessity of religion to the contents of religion and especially to the asserted superiority of the Islamic religion over others, al-'Azm shares more fully in more general views of Islamic reformists.

Accordingly, he presents Islam as the most advanced and most rational of all religions, and as the final and comprehensive guarantor of societal order in its most advanced and complex form (al-'Azm 2015, 14-6). According to Durkheimian sociology, each society creates the religion it requires for its order, with the consequence that changes in the makeup of society result in new religions. According then to the Islamic sociologist al-'Azm, Islam is flexible enough to address the changing needs of society, meaning no new religion will be required. Based on this premise, al-'Azm maintains that positive legislations (*al-shara'i' al-wad'iyya*) are derived from godly laws (ibid., 13) and that the rational laws (*al-qawanin al-'aqliyya*) elaborated for contemporary complex societies, even though not directly taken from Islamic *shari'a*, do not fundamentally depart from its meanings (ibid., 16).

This statement points not only to the possibility of secular equivalents to religious laws but also shows, again, that the asserted comprehensiveness of Islam is not a timeless given, but rather mirrors the peculiar modern demand for an order covering all spheres of life, which can be distinguished into religion, society, and the state. We have already discussed this aspect concerning the connection-yet-distinction between religion and politics in Islam, which is addressed here again. Favoring a sociopolitical order grounded in both society and, complementarily, in God, al-'Azm here names obedience to the leader (*imam*) as obligatory, as long as this does not lead to violating what the Creator has commanded and forbidden or to undermining a pillar of Islamic society (*rakn al-mujtama' al-islami*; ibid., 15). It is also based on this modern and secular premise that al-'Azm names Islamic regulations for all spheres of life, including purity (*tahara*), sitting and standing, eating, and clothing (ibid., 14). While points like this might well appeal to present-day norm-based *salafi*s, they should not distract us from the secular modern premises at work in al-'Azm's oeuvre and his primarily sociological perspective on religion, but rather should be read as an illustration of how these premises and such a perspective may be elaborated within an Islamic discourse.

To conclude, I shall now formulate implications of my reading of al-'Azm for research on Islam and secularity in general.

6. Concluding Remarks: Islam, Religion, and the Secular

This article has shown, firstly, that Rafiq al-'Azm clearly operated with the distinction between religion, society, and the state; secondly, that he used *islam* to refer to both the religious and the secular; and, thirdly, that he both validated religion from a societal perspective and society from a religious perspective, albeit elaborating primarily the former and leaving the elaboration of the latter to scholars of religion.

While al-'Azm's writings adhere to the basic approach of Islamic reformism, his work helps highlight the fundamental secularity of this intellectual trend. In 1904, al-'Azm formulated an argument for the separation of religion and politics in *al-Manar*, the mouthpiece of Islamic reformism. This argument is generally attributed to 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq in 1925. Abd al-Raziq was heavily criticized by *al-Manar*'s editor, Rashid Rida. Al-'Azm's debate with al-Yafi'i and shifts in al-'Azm's writings concerning the relationship between religion and politics show that formulating a mutual dependency of religion and the secular requires a distinction to have been made between these two spheres, which remains in place even when the connection between the two spheres is tightened. If, in addition to bringing attention to the work of al-'Azm, this article provided information on the secularity of Islamic reformism more generally, my argument concerning the use of "Islam" to refer to both religion and

the secular also points to crucial hermeneutical and analytical problems concerning the study of Islam and secularity.

Carl Heinrich Becker in the opening article of *Der Islam* (1910) refers to "Islam as a problem" because, while a religion at its core, Islam also refers to a civilization and a political order. While Becker himself somewhat disentangled these dimensions, it is obvious that the multiple references of Islam continue to facilitate views of Islam being a religion that is more than just religion, of it being a holistic system of life, and of Islam also having had a political theory from the beginning. Political agendas and issues of identity aside, the analytical problem remains that the use of "Islam" to refer to both religion and the secular blurs the distinction between both realms.

Reinhard Schulze has suggested a model for understanding how Islam referring to both religion and the secular came about. Schulze draws on an observation by Niklas Luhmann that the term "the secular" is an evaluation of society from the perspective of religion, that is, an evaluation of the societal environment of religion. Concomitantly, religion came to be considered as "culture" from the perspective of society. After having been established, both evaluations can then also be used in a self-referential manner (Schulze 2013, 335-6). Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Islam was validated as culture by societal actors – who a couple of decades later would also appropriate the "secular" as a self-characterization (ibid., 346-7). Viewed this way, it is the secular configuration of Islam as culture complementing the understanding of Islam as a religion that results in the use of "Islam" to refer to religion and the secular.

Building upon this model that helpfully maps the evolution of two fundamental perspectives on Islam, we must consider why al-'Azm cannot be neatly identified with one perspective but rather shifts between both perspectives, albeit giving primacy to the societal one. One may suggest that this is because, in the intellectual context of al-'Azm, both perspectives were not yet as clearly distinguished. This is not convincing, however, not least given the clear distinction al-'Azm makes between religion, society, and the state and the revealing debate as to whether sociopolitical order ought to be based on religion or not. More plausibly, it was this very distinction between both perspectives being made and the two perspectives subsequently being integrated into one Islamic discourse that enabled the continuous shift between both.

It is, I suggest, this integration of both perspectives that is constitutive of Islamic reformism. While Islamic reformism is conventionally considered to combine or harmonize (traditional) Islam and (Western) modernity, I would argue that it would be more appropriate to regard it as integrating a societal perspective on religion as culture and a religious perspective on society as secular. This integration was, in effect, the aim of Islamic reformists, who reformulated Islam as a modern religion for society. In this, they shared in broader intellectual trends of modernity – take for example the following statement by the Rabbi Ludwig Philippson from 1855 (ix):

> My especial aim and endeavor have been to remove religion from the ideal station assigned to it, into the position to which it belongs – into life. Religion has so long abandoned society, that it is scarcely a matter of surprise if society has in its turn abandoned religion. The two thus parted must be reunited. Religion must come to understand that it can exercise no true and beneficent influence on the individual, until society collectively shall have become religious. Society must come to comprehend, that it cannot raise itself from its present prostrate condition, until it shall have realised the principles which were long ago enunciated by religion, but of which the removal of religion from the actual world, its taking refuge exclusively in the celestial 'Hereafter,' have caused the loss for actual life.

Such a "fusion of religion and society," as also attempted by Islamic reformists (Haddad 2008), hinges on the integration of previously distinct perspectives, as we have said. If Rafiq al-'Azm's contribution to Islamic reformism lies in elaborating the societal perspective on religion, this societal perspective, in the eyes of Islamic reformists, must never claim outright self-sufficiency – once such overt claims to secular self-sufficiency are made, they are fiercely attacked by Islamic reformists, who then, in turn, more exclusively argue from their religious perspective for the self-sufficiency of religion, as Rashid Rida increasingly did from the 1920s.

A central question that remains is whether the use of "Islam" to refer to both religion and the secular, while crucially shaped by the engagement of overt secularist stances, was prompted only by the latter or is already discernable in earlier Islamic thought. I would suggest that the fascinating and important enterprise of discerning pre-modern non-European articulations of secularity should start with modern concepts used to refer to modern secularity within a particular discursive tradition, and then test how far these concepts may be traced back before starting to lose their modern meanings. Pertinent examples in the Islamic tradition that also came up in al-'Azm's validation of secularity were the conceptual pairs of *din wa-dunya* and *'ibadat wa-mu'amalat*. Was it only from within their modern secular context, shaped by colonial hegemony, that Islamic reformists like al-'Azm appropriated and updated a classical conceptual pair like *din wa-dunya* to address secularity, or was this appropriation facilitated by conceptual developments before that colonial encounter? Was secularity formulated in the Islamic discursive tradition merely in response to the hegemonic Christian-European tradition or did both traditions converge in modernity? Do we, then, observe multiple secularities because of the different appropriations of Western secularity or because of the convergence of multiple arrangements of religion and the world in modernity?

In a tentative answer to this overarching question and departing from the topic of this paper, I would like to end by suggesting a model of convergence that contrasts with one of diffusion. Under the obsolete paradigm of modernization as Westernization, the landing of Napoleon in Egypt in 1798 was deemed to mark the beginning of modernity in Egypt and the wider Islamic world,

which was considered to have declined in the preceding centuries. Revisionist studies have now firmly refuted this notion of decline but they have not been able to produce a convincing alternative narrative of internal modernization (Ze'evi 2004, 86 still holds true in this regard). Such a narrative of internal modernization is, however, not to be expected in the first place since the modern self-understanding was only shaped in the colonial encounter and was not an internal development, either in "the West," or in the "Islamic world" – two concepts that, notably, were coined only in the colonial encounter and form part of the modern self-understanding. Against both the outdated paradigm of modernization as Westernization and revisionist claims to internal modernization, the importance of the Napoleonic invasion thus lies in its having created a moment of encounter, which contributed to the emergence of modern self-understanding.

While this view does acknowledge European hegemony as inscribed into modernity both historically and conceptually (Zemmin 2018, 1-9), it also allows for early modern configurations. If one considers modernity as a product of the colonial encounter, one can of course not speak of early modernity in a teleological sense. However, there were developments prior to modernity that enabled the communication of different discursive traditions in modernity and their convergence under the influence of European hegemony. And it seems that moments of encounter were crucial for these developments too. Take, for example, the fact that the Ottoman-Turkish concept of *devlet* (power, dynasty, state) was first used in the plural shortly after the treatise of Karlowitz (1699) that acknowledged a plurality of legitimate powers. These powers and the nations they represented were thought to exist in the same historical period. Indeed, the pluralization of *devlet* was contemporaneous with the term "history" becoming a collective singular, with the resultant implications of desacralization and linear time (Sigalas 2012). This underlying transformation in the understanding of time then made possible the articulation and appropriation of the modern understanding of evolution and progress. Another example would be the postulation of universal social laws to be "discovered," elaborated, and applied by humans as autonomous rational beings. One can easily sense how observing and interacting with different social collectivities nurtured this sociological ambition. These considerations combined suggest that the modern self-understanding was only shaped in the colonial encounter, but drew upon and continued intellectual transformations of different discursive traditions that then converged under the influence of European hegemony.

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